

# JOHN BURROUGHS

A YEAR IN THE  
FIELDS

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*A Year in the Fields:*

*ISBN <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/31292>*

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# **A Year in the Fields**

## **JOHN BURROUGHS A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

**BY CLIFTON JOHNSON**

In the town of Roxbury, among the western Catskills, was born April 3, 1837, John Burroughs. The house in which he first saw the light was an unpainted, squarish structure, only a single story high, with a big chimney in the middle. This house was removed a few years later, and a better and somewhat larger one, which still stands, was built in its place. The situation is very pleasing. Roundabout is a varied country of heights, dales, woods and pastures, and cultivated fields. The dwelling is in a wide upland hollow that falls away to the east and south into a deep valley, beyond which rise line on line of great mounding hills. These turn blue in the distance and look like immense billows rolling in from a distant ocean.

There were nine children in the Burroughs family, and John was one of the younger members of this numerous household.

He was a true country boy, acquainted with all the hard work and all the pleasures of an old-fashioned farm life. His people were poor and he had his own way to make in the world, but the environment was on the whole a salutary one.

He has always had a marked affection for the place of his birth, and he rejoices in the fact that from an eminence near his present home on the Hudson he can see mountains that are visible from his native hills. Two or three times every year he goes back to these hills to renew his youth among the familiar scenes of his boyhood.

"Johnny" Burroughs, as he was known to his home folks and the neighbors, was very like the other youngsters of the region in his interests, his ways, and his work. Yet as compared with them he undoubtedly had a livelier imagination, and things made a keener impression on his mind. In some cases his sensitiveness was more disturbing than gratifying. When his grandfather told "spook" stories to the children gathered around the evening blaze of the kitchen fireplace, John's hair would almost stand on end and he was afraid of every shadow.

He went to school in the little red schoolhouse across the valley, and as he grew older he aspired to attend an academy. But he had to make the opportunity for himself, and only succeeded in doing so at the age of seventeen, when he raised the needful money by six months of teaching. This enabled him in the autumn of 1854 to enter the Heading Literary Institute at Ashland. He found the life there enjoyable, but his funds ran

low by spring and he was obliged to return to the farm. Until September he labored among his native fields, then took up teaching again. When pay day came he set off for a seminary of some note at Cooperstown, where a single term brought his student days forever to a close, and after another period of farm work at home he borrowed a small sum of money and journeyed to Illinois. Near Freeport he secured a school at forty dollars a month, which was much more than he could have earned in the East. Yet he gave up his position at the end of six months. "I came back," he says, "because of 'the girl I left behind me'; and it was pretty hard to stay even as long as I did."

Soon afterward he married. His total capital at the time was fifty dollars, a sum which was reduced one fifth by the wedding expenses. For several years he continued to teach, and at the age of twenty-five we find him in charge of a school near West Point. Up to this time his interest in nature and his aptitude for observation lay dormant. But now it was awakened by reading a volume of Audubon which chanced to fall into his hands. That was a revelation, and he went to the woods with entirely new interest and enthusiasm. He began at once to get acquainted with the birds, his vision grew keen and alert, and birds he had passed by before, he now saw at once.

Meanwhile the Civil War was going on, and it aroused in Burroughs a strong desire to enlist. He visited Washington to get a closer view of army life, but what he saw of it rather damped his military ardor. It seemed to him that the men were driven

about and herded like cattle; and when a peaceful position in the Treasury Department was offered him he accepted it, and for nine years was a Government clerk.

At the Treasury he guarded a vault and kept a record of the money that went in or out. The duties were not arduous, and in his long intervals of leisure his mind wandered far afield. It dwelt on the charm of flitting wings and bird melodies, on the pleasures of rambling along country roads and into the woodlands; and, sitting before the Treasury vault, at a high desk and facing an iron wall he began to write. There was no need for notes. His memory was all-sufficient, and the result was the essays which make "Wake-Robin," – his first book.

By 1873 Burroughs had had enough of the routine of a Government clerkship, and he resigned to become the receiver of a bank in Middletown, New York. Later he accepted a position as bank examiner in the eastern part of the State. But his longing to return to the soil was growing apace, and presently he bought a little farm on the west shore of the Hudson. He at once erected a substantial stone house and started orchards and vineyards, yet it was not until 1885 that he felt he could relinquish his Government position and dwell on his own land with the assurance of a safe support.

He has never been a great traveler. Still, he has been abroad twice and has recently made a trip to Alaska. Lesser excursions have taken him to Virginia and Kentucky, and to Canada, and he has camped in Maine and the Adirondacks. But the district that

he knows best and that he puts oftenest into his nature studies is his home country in the Catskills and the region about his "Riverby" farm. Very little of his writing, however, has been done in the house in which he lives. This was never a wholly satisfactory working-place. He felt he must get away from all conventionalities, and he early put up on the outskirts of his vineyards a little bark-covered study, to which it has been his habit to retire for his indoor thinking and writing. He still uses this study more or less, and often in the summer evenings sits in an easy-chair, under an apple-tree just outside the door, and listens to the voices of Nature while he looks off across the Hudson.

But the spot that at present most engages his affection is a reclaimed woodland swamp, back among some rocky hills, a mile or two from the river. A few years ago the swamp was a wild tangle of brush and stumps, fallen trees and murky pools. Now it has been cleared and drained, and the dark forest mould produces wonderful crops of celery, sweet corn, potatoes, and other vegetables. On a shoulder of rock near the swamp borders Burroughs has built a rustic house, sheathed outside with slabs, and smacking in all its arrangements of the woodlands and of the days of pioneering. It has an open fireplace, where the flames crackle cheerfully on chilly evenings, and over the fireplace coals most of the cooking is done; but in really hot weather an oil stove serves instead.

On the other side of the hollow a delightfully cold spring

bubbles forth, and immediately back of the house is a natural cavern which makes an ideal storage place for perishable foods. The descent to the cavern is made by a rude ladder, and the sight of Burroughs coming and going between it and the house has a most suggestive touch of the wild and romantic.

He is often at "Slabsides" – sometimes for weeks or months at a time, though he always makes daily visits to the valley to look after the work in his vineyards and to visit the post-office at the railway station. He is a leisurely man, to whom haste and the nervous pursuit of wealth or fame are totally foreign. He thoroughly enjoys country loitering, and when he gets a hint of anything interesting or new going on among the birds and little creatures of the fields, he likes to stop and investigate. His ears are remarkably quick and his eyes and sense of smell phenomenally acute, and much which to most of us would be unperceived or meaningless he reads as if it were an open book. Best of all, he has the power of imparting his enjoyment, and what he writes is full of outdoor fragrance, racy, piquant, and individual. His snap and vivacity are wholly unartificial. They are a part of the man – a man full of imagination and sensitiveness, a philosopher, a humorist, a hater of shams and pretension. The tenor of his life changes little from year to year, his affections remain steadfast, and this hardy, gray poet of things rural will continue, as ever, the warm-hearted nature enthusiast, and inspirer of the love of nature in others.

# A YEAR IN THE FIELDS

## I

### A SNOW-STORM

That is a striking line with which Emerson opens his beautiful poem of the Snow-Storm: —

"Announced by all the trumpets of the sky,  
Arrives the snow, and, driving o'er the fields,  
Seems nowhere to alight."

One seems to see the clouds puffing their cheeks as they sound the charge of their white legions. But the line is more accurately descriptive of a rain-storm, as, in both summer and winter, rain is usually preceded by wind. Homer, describing a snow-storm in his time, says: —

"The winds are lulled."

The preparations of a snow-storm are, as a rule, gentle and quiet; a marked hush pervades both the earth and the sky. The movements of the celestial forces are muffled, as if the snow already paved the way of their coming. There is no uproar,

no clashing of arms, no blowing of wind trumpets. These soft, feathery, exquisite crystals are formed as if in the silence and privacy of the inner cloud-chambers. Rude winds would break the spell and mar the process. The clouds are smoother, and slower in their movements, with less definite outlines than those which bring rain. In fact, everything is prophetic of the gentle and noiseless meteor that is approaching, and of the stillness that is to succeed it, when "all the batteries of sound are spiked," as Lowell says, and "we see the movements of life as a deaf man sees it, – a mere wraith of the clamorous existence that inflicts itself on our ears when the ground is bare." After the storm is fairly launched the winds not infrequently awake, and, seeing their opportunity, pipe the flakes a lively dance. I am speaking now of the typical, full-born midwinter storm that comes to us from the North or N. N. E., and that piles the landscape knee-deep with snow. Such a storm once came to us the last day of January, – the master-storm of the winter. Previous to that date, we had had but light snow. The spruces had been able to catch it all upon their arms, and keep a circle of bare ground beneath them where the birds scratched. But the day following this fall, they stood with their lower branches completely buried. If the Old Man of the North had but sent us his couriers and errand-boys before, the old graybeard appeared himself at our doors on this occasion, and we were all his subjects. His flag was upon every tree and roof, his seal upon every door and window, and his embargo upon every path and highway. He slipped down upon

us, too, under the cover of such a bright, seraphic day, – a day that disarmed suspicion with all but the wise ones, a day without a cloud or a film, a gentle breeze from the west, a dry, bracing air, a blazing sun that brought out the bare ground under the lee of the fences and farm-buildings, and at night a spotless moon near her full. The next morning the sky reddened in the east, then became gray, heavy, and silent. A seamless cloud covered it. The smoke from the chimneys went up with a barely perceptible slant toward the north. In the forenoon the cedar-birds, purple finches, yellowbirds, nuthatches, bluebirds, were in flocks or in couples and trios about the trees, more or less noisy and loquacious. About noon a thin white veil began to blur the distant southern mountains. It was like a white dream slowly descending upon them. The first flake or flakelet that reached me was a mere white speck that came idly circling and eddying to the ground. I could not see it after it alighted. It might have been a scale from the feather of some passing bird, or a larger mote in the air that the stillness was allowing to settle. Yet it was the altogether inaudible and infinitesimal trumpeter that announced the coming storm, the grain of sand that heralded the desert. Presently another fell, then another; the white mist was creeping up the river valley. How slowly and loiteringly it came, and how microscopic its first siftings!

This mill is bolting its flour very fine, you think. But wait a little; it gets coarser by and by; you begin to see the flakes; they increase in numbers and in size, and before one o'clock it

is snowing steadily. The flakes come straight down, but in a half hour they have a marked slant toward the north; the wind is taking a hand in the game. By mid-afternoon the storm is coming in regular pulse-beats or in vertical waves. The wind is not strong, but seems steady; the pines hum, yet there is a sort of rhythmic throb in the meteor; the air toward the wind looks ribbed with steady-moving vertical waves of snow. The impulses travel along like undulations in a vast suspended white curtain, imparted by some invisible hand there in the northeast. As the day declines the storm waxes, the wind increases, the snow-fall thickens, and a privacy which you feel outside as well as in. Out-of-doors you seem in a vast tent of snow; the distance is shut out, near-by objects are hidden; there are white curtains above you and white screens about you, and you feel housed and secluded in storm. Your friend leaves your door, and he is wrapped away in white obscurity, caught up in a cloud, and his footsteps are obliterated. Travelers meet on the road, and do not see or hear each other till they are face to face. The passing train, half a mile away, gives forth a mere wraith of sound. Its whistle is deadened as in a dense wood.

"the housemates sit  
Around the radiant fireplace, inclosed  
In a tumultuous privacy of storm,"

Still the storm rose. At five o'clock I went forth to face it in a two-mile walk. It was exhilarating in the extreme. The snow

was lighter than chaff. It had been dried in the Arctic ovens to the last degree. The foot sped through it without hindrance. I fancied the grouse and the quail quietly sitting down in the open places, and letting it drift over them. With head under wing, and wing snugly folded, they would be softly and tenderly buried in a few moments. The mice and the squirrels were in their dens, but I fancied the fox asleep upon some rock or log, and allowing the flakes to cover him. The hare in her form, too, was being warmly sepulchred with the rest. I thought of the young cattle and the sheep huddled together on the lee side of a haystack in some remote field, all enveloped in mantles of white.

"I thought me on the ourie cattle,  
Or silly sheep, wha bide this brattle  
O' wintry war,  
Or thro' the drift, deep-lairing sprattle,  
Beneath a scaur.

"Ilk happing bird, wee helpless thing,  
That in the merry months o' spring  
Delighted me to hear thee sing,  
What comes o' thee?  
Where wilt thou cow'r thy chittering wing,  
And close thy ee?"

As I passed the creek, I noticed the white woolly masses that filled the water. It was as if somebody upstream had been

washing his sheep and the water had carried away all the wool, and I thought of the Psalmist's phrase, "He giveth snow like wool." On the river a heavy fall of snow simulates a thin layer of cotton batting. The tide drifts it along, and, where it meets with an obstruction alongshore, it folds up and becomes wrinkled or convoluted like a fabric, or like cotton sheeting. Attempt to row a boat through it, and it seems indeed like cotton or wool, every fibre of which resists your progress.

As the sun went down and darkness fell, the storm impulse reached its full. It became a wild conflagration of wind and snow; the world was wrapt in frost flame; it enveloped one, and penetrated his lungs and caught away his breath like a blast from a burning city. How it whipped around and under every cover and searched out every crack and crevice, sifting under the shingles in the attic, darting its white tongue under the kitchen door, puffing its breath down the chimney, roaring through the woods, stalking like a sheeted ghost across the hills, bending in white and ever-changing forms above the fences, sweeping across the plains, whirling in eddies behind the buildings, or leaping spitefully up their walls, – in short, taking the world entirely to itself, and giving a loose rein to its desire.

But in the morning, behold! the world was not consumed; it was not the besom of destruction, after all, but the gentle hand of mercy. How deeply and warmly and spotlessly Earth's nakedness is clothed! – the "wool" of the Psalmist nearly two feet deep. And as far as warmth and protection are concerned, there is a good

deal of the virtue of wool in such a snow-fall. How it protects the grass, the plants, the roots of the trees, and the worms, insects, and smaller animals in the ground! It is a veritable fleece, beneath which the shivering earth ("the frozen hills ached with pain," says one of our young poets) is restored to warmth. When the temperature of the air is at zero, the thermometer, placed at the surface of the ground beneath a foot and a half of snow, would probably indicate but a few degrees below freezing; the snow is rendered such a perfect non-conductor of heat mainly by reason of the quantity of air that is caught and retained between the crystals. Then how, like a fleece of wool, it rounds and fills out the landscape, and makes the leanest and most angular field look smooth!

The day dawned, and continued as innocent and fair as the day which had preceded, – two mountain peaks of sky and sun, with their valley of cloud and snow between. Walk to the nearest spring run on such a morning, and you can see the Colorado valley and the great cañons of the West in miniature, carved in alabaster. In the midst of the plain of snow lie these chasms; the vertical walls, the bold headlands, the turrets and spires and obelisks, the rounded and towering capes, the carved and buttressed precipices, the branch valleys and cañons, and the winding and tortuous course of the main channel are all here, – all that the Yosemite or Yellowstone have to show, except the terraces and the cascades. Sometimes my cañon is bridged, and one's fancy runs nimbly across a vast arch of Parian marble, and

that makes up for the falls and the terraces. Where the ground is marshy, I come upon a pretty and vivid illustration of what I have read and been told of the Florida formation. This white and brittle limestone is undermined by water. Here are the dimples and depressions, the sinks and the wells, the springs and the lakes. Some places a mouse might break through the surface and reveal the water far beneath, or the snow gives way of its own weight, and you have a minute Florida well, with the truncated cone-shape and all. The arched and subterranean pools and passages are there likewise.

But there is a more beautiful and fundamental geology than this in the snow-storm: we are admitted into Nature's oldest laboratory, and see the working of the law by which the foundations of the material universe were laid, – the law or mystery of crystallization. The earth is built upon crystals; the granite rock is only a denser and more compact snow, or a kind of ice that was vapor once and may be vapor again. "Every stone is nothing else but a congealed lump of frozen earth," says Plutarch. By cold and pressure air can be liquefied, perhaps solidified. A little more time, a little more heat, and the hills are but April snow-banks. Nature has but two forms, the cell and the crystal, – the crystal first, the cell last. All organic nature is built up of the cell; all inorganic, of the crystal. Cell upon cell rises the vegetable, rises the animal; crystal wedded to and compacted with crystal stretches the earth beneath them. See in the falling snow the old cooling and precipitation, and the

shooting, radiating forms that are the architects of planet and globe.

We love the sight of the brown and ruddy earth; it is the color of life, while a snow-covered plain is the face of death; yet snow is but the mask of the life-giving rain; it, too, is the friend of man, – the tender, sculpturesque, immaculate, warming, fertilizing snow.

## II

# WINTER NEIGHBORS

The country is more of a wilderness, more of a wild solitude, in the winter than in the summer. The wild comes out. The urban, the cultivated, is hidden or negated. You shall hardly know a good field from a poor, a meadow from a pasture, a park from a forest. Lines and boundaries are disregarded; gates and bar-ways are unclosed; man lets go his hold upon the earth; title-deeds are deep buried beneath the snow; the best-kept grounds relapse to a state of nature; under the pressure of the cold, all the wild creatures become outlaws, and roam abroad beyond their usual haunts. The partridge comes to the orchard for buds; the rabbit comes to the garden and lawn; the crows and jays come to the ash-heap and corn-crib, the snow buntings to the stack and to the barnyard; the sparrows pilfer from the domestic fowls; the pine grosbeak comes down from the north and shears your maples of their buds; the fox prowls about your premises at night; and the red squirrels find your grain in the barn or steal the butternuts from your attic. In fact, winter, like some great calamity, changes the status of most creatures and sets them adrift. Winter, like poverty, makes us acquainted with strange bedfellows.

For my part, my nearest approach to a strange bedfellow is the little gray rabbit that has taken up her abode under my study floor. As she spends the day here and is out larking at night, she is

not much of a bedfellow, after all. It is probable that I disturb her slumbers more than she does mine. I think she is some support to me under there, – a silent, wide-eyed witness and backer; a type of the gentle and harmless in savage nature. She has no sagacity to give me or lend me, but that soft, nimble foot of hers, and that touch as of cotton wherever she goes, are worthy of emulation. I think I can feel her goodwill through the floor, and I hope she can mine. When I have a happy thought, I imagine her ears twitch, especially when I think of the sweet apple I will place by her doorway at night. I wonder if that fox chanced to catch a glimpse of her the other night when he stealthily leaped over the fence near by and walked along between the study and the house? How clearly one could read that it was not a little dog that had passed there! There was something furtive in the track; it shied off away from the house and around it, as if eying it suspiciously; and then it had the caution and deliberation of the fox, – bold, bold, but not too bold; wariness was in every footprint. If it had been a little dog that had chanced to wander that way, when he crossed my path he would have followed it up to the barn and have gone smelling around for a bone; but this sharp, cautious track held straight across all others, keeping five or six rods from the house, up the hill, across the highway toward a neighboring farmstead, with its nose in the air, and its eye and ear alert, so to speak.

A winter neighbor of mine, in whom I am interested, and who perhaps lends me his support after his kind, is a little red owl, whose retreat is in the heart of an old apple-tree just over the

fence. Where he keeps himself in spring and summer, I do not know, but late every fall, and at intervals all winter, his hiding-place is discovered by the jays and nuthatches, and proclaimed from the treetops for the space of half an hour or so, with all the powers of voice they can command. Four times during one winter they called me out to behold this little ogre feigning sleep in his den, sometimes in one apple-tree, sometimes in another. Whenever I heard their cries, I knew my neighbor was being berated. The birds would take turns at looking in upon him, and uttering their alarm-notes. Every jay within hearing would come to the spot, and at once approach the hole in the trunk or limb, and with a kind of breathless eagerness and excitement take a peep at the owl, and then join the outcry. When I approached they would hastily take a final look, and then withdraw and regard my movements intently. After accustoming my eye to the faint light of the cavity for a few moments, I could usually make out the owl at the bottom feigning sleep. Feigning, I say, because this is what he really did, as I first discovered one day when I cut into his retreat with the axe. The loud blows and the falling chips did not disturb him at all. When I reached in a stick and pulled him over on his side, leaving one of his wings spread out, he made no attempt to recover himself, but lay among the chips and fragments of decayed wood, like a part of themselves. Indeed, it took a sharp eye to distinguish him. Not till I had pulled him forth by one wing, rather rudely, did he abandon his trick of simulated sleep or death. Then, like a detected pickpocket, he was suddenly

transformed into another creature. His eyes flew wide open, his talons clutched my finger, his ears were depressed, and every motion and look said, "Hands off, at your peril." Finding this game did not work, he soon began to "play 'possum" again. I put a cover over my study wood-box and kept him captive for a week. Look in upon him at any time, night or day, and he was apparently wrapped in the profoundest slumber; but the live mice which I put into his box from time to time found his sleep was easily broken; there would be a sudden rustle in the box, a faint squeak, and then silence. After a week of captivity I gave him his freedom in the full sunshine: no trouble for him to see which way and where to go.

Just at dusk in the winter nights, I often hear his soft *bur-r-r-r*, very pleasing and bell-like. What a furtive, woody sound it is in the winter stillness, so unlike the harsh scream of the hawk! But all the ways of the owl are ways of softness and duskiness. His wings are shod with silence, his plumage is edged with down.

Another owl neighbor of mine, with whom I pass the time of day more frequently than with the last, lives farther away. I pass his castle every night on my way to the post-office, and in winter, if the hour is late enough, am pretty sure to see him standing in his doorway, surveying the passers-by and the landscape through narrow slits in his eyes. For four successive winters now have I observed him. As the twilight begins to deepen, he rises up out of his cavity in the apple-tree, scarcely faster than the moon rises from behind the hill, and sits in the opening, completely framed

by its outlines of gray bark and dead wood, and by his protective coloring virtually invisible to every eye that does not know he is there. Probably my own is the only eye that has ever penetrated his secret, and mine never would have done so had I not chanced on one occasion to see him leave his retreat and make a raid upon a shrike that was impaling a shrew-mouse upon a thorn in a neighboring tree, and which I was watching. Failing to get the mouse, the owl returned swiftly to his cavity, and ever since, while going that way, I have been on the lookout for him. Dozens of teams and foot-passengers pass him late in the day, but he regards them not, nor they him. When I come along and pause to salute him, he opens his eyes a little wider, and, appearing to recognize me, quickly shrinks and fades into the background of his door in a very weird and curious manner. When he is not at his outlook, or when he is, it requires the best powers of the eye to decide the point, as the empty cavity itself is almost an exact image of him. If the whole thing had been carefully studied, it could not have answered its purpose better. The owl stands quite perpendicular, presenting a front of light mottled gray; the eyes are closed to a mere slit, the ear-feathers depressed, the beak buried in the plumage, and the whole attitude is one of silent, motionless waiting and observation. If a mouse should be seen crossing the highway, or scudding over any exposed part of the snowy surface in the twilight, the owl would doubtless swoop down upon it. I think the owl has learned to distinguish me from the rest of the passers-by; at least, when I stop before him, and he

sees himself observed, he backs down into his den, as I have said, in a very amusing manner. Whether bluebirds, nuthatches, and chickadees – birds that pass the night in cavities of trees – ever run into the clutches of the dozing owl, I should be glad to know. My impression is, however, that they seek out smaller cavities. An old willow by the roadside blew down one summer, and a decayed branch broke open, revealing a brood of half-fledged owls, and many feathers and quills of bluebirds, orioles, and other songsters, showing plainly enough why all birds fear and berate the owl.

The English house sparrows, which are so rapidly increasing among us, and which must add greatly to the food supply of the owls and other birds of prey, seek to baffle their enemies by roosting in the densest evergreens they can find, in the arborvitæ, and in hemlock hedges. Soft-winged as the owl is, he cannot steal in upon such a retreat without giving them warning.

These sparrows are becoming about the most noticeable of my winter neighbors, and a troop of them every morning watch me put out the hens' feed, and soon claim their share. I rather encouraged them in their neighborliness, till one day I discovered the snow under a favorite plum-tree where they most frequently perched covered with the scales of the fruit-buds. On investigating, I found that the tree had been nearly stripped of its buds, – a very unneighborly act on the part of the sparrows, considering, too, all the cracked corn I had scattered for them. So I at once served notice on them that our good understanding

was at an end. And a hint is as good as a kick with this bird. The stone I hurled among them, and the one with which I followed them up, may have been taken as a kick; but they were only a hint of the shot-gun that stood ready in the corner. The sparrows left in high dudgeon, and were not back again in some days, and were then very shy. No doubt the time is near at hand when we shall have to wage serious war upon these sparrows, as they long have had to do on the continent of Europe. And yet it will be hard to kill the little wretches, the only Old World bird we have. When I take down my gun to shoot them I shall probably remember that the Psalmist said, "I watch, and am as a sparrow alone upon the housetop," and maybe the recollection will cause me to stay my hand. The sparrows have the Old World hardiness and prolificness; they are wise and tenacious of life, and we shall find it by and by no small matter to keep them in check. Our native birds are much different, less prolific, less shrewd, less aggressive and persistent, less quick-witted and able to read the note of danger or hostility, – in short, less sophisticated. Most of our birds are yet essentially wild, that is, little changed by civilization. In winter, especially, they sweep by me and around me in flocks, – the Canada sparrow, the snow bunting, the shore lark, the pine grosbeak, the redpoll, the cedar-bird, – feeding upon frozen apples in the orchard, upon cedar-berries, upon maple-buds, and the berries of the mountain-ash, and the celtis, and upon the seeds of the weeds that rise above the snow in the field, or upon the hayseed dropped where the cattle have

been foddered in the barnyard or about the distant stack; but yet taking no heed of man, in no way changing their habits so as to take advantage of his presence in nature. The pine grosbeaks will come in numbers upon your porch to get the black drupes of the honeysuckle or the woodbine, or within reach of your windows to get the berries of the mountain-ash, but they know you not; they look at you as innocently and unconcernedly as at a bear or moose in their native north, and your house is no more to them than a ledge of rocks.

The only ones of my winter neighbors that actually rap at my door are the nuthatches and woodpeckers, and these do not know that it is my door. My retreat is covered with the bark of young chestnut-trees, and the birds, I suspect, mistake it for a huge stump that ought to hold fat grubs (there is not even a book-worm inside of it), and their loud rapping often makes me think I have a caller indeed. I place fragments of hickory-nuts in the interstices of the bark, and thus attract the nuthatches; a bone upon my window-sill attracts both nuthatches and the downy woodpecker. They peep in curiously through the window upon me, pecking away at my bone, too often a very poor one. A bone nailed to a tree a few feet in front of the window attracts crows as well as lesser birds. Even the slate-colored snowbird, a seed-eater, comes and nibbles it occasionally.

The bird that seems to consider he has the best right to the bone both upon the tree and upon the sill is the downy woodpecker, my favorite neighbor among the winter birds, to

whom I will mainly devote the remainder of this chapter. His retreat is but a few paces from my own, in the decayed limb of an apple-tree which he excavated several autumns ago. I say "he" because the red plume on the top of his head proclaims the sex. It seems not to be generally known to our writers upon ornithology that certain of our woodpeckers – probably all the winter residents – each fall excavate a limb or the trunk of a tree in which to pass the winter, and that the cavity is abandoned in the spring, probably for a new one in which nidification takes place. So far as I have observed, these cavities are drilled out only by the males. Where the females take up their quarters I am not so well informed, though I suspect that they use the abandoned holes of the males of the previous year.

The particular woodpecker to which I refer drilled his first hole in my apple-tree one fall four or five years ago. This he occupied till the following spring, when he abandoned it. The next fall he began a hole in an adjoining limb, later than before, and when it was about half completed a female took possession of his old quarters. I am sorry to say that this seemed to enrage the male very much, and he persecuted the poor bird whenever she appeared upon the scene. He would fly at her spitefully and drive her off. One chilly November morning, as I passed under the tree, I heard the hammer of the little architect in his cavity, and at the same time saw the persecuted female sitting at the entrance of the other hole as if she would fain come out. She was actually shivering, probably from both fear and

cold. I understood the situation at a glance; the bird was afraid to come forth and brave the anger of the male. Not till I had rapped smartly upon the limb with my stick did she come out and attempt to escape; but she had not gone ten feet from the tree before the male was in hot pursuit, and in a few moments had driven her back to the same tree, where she tried to avoid him among the branches. A few days after, he rid himself of his unwelcome neighbor in the following ingenious manner: he fairly scuttled the other cavity; he drilled a hole into the bottom of it that let in the light and the cold, and I saw the female there no more. I did not see him in the act of rendering this tenement uninhabitable; but one morning, behold it was punctured at the bottom, and the circumstances all seemed to point to him as the author of it. There is probably no gallantry among the birds except at the mating season. I have frequently seen the male woodpecker drive the female away from the hole upon the tree. When she hopped around to the other end and timidly nibbled it, he would presently dart spitefully at her. She would then take up her position in his rear and wait till he had finished his meal. The position of the female among the birds is very much the same as that of woman among savage tribes. Most of the drudgery of life falls upon her, and the leavings of the males are often her lot.

My bird is a genuine little savage, doubtless, but I value him as a neighbor. It is a satisfaction during the cold or stormy winter nights to know he is warm and cosy there in his retreat. When the day is bad and unfit to be abroad in, he is there too. When I

wish to know if he is at home, I go and rap upon his tree, and, if he is not too lazy or indifferent, after some delay he shows his head in his round doorway about ten feet above, and looks down inquiringly upon me, – sometimes latterly I think half resentfully, as much as to say, "I would thank you not to disturb me so often." After sundown, he will not put his head out any more when I call, but as I step away I can get a glimpse of him inside looking cold and reserved. He is a late riser, especially if it is a cold or disagreeable morning, in this respect being like the barn fowls; it is sometimes near nine o'clock before I see him leave his tree. On the other hand, he comes home early, being in, if the day is unpleasant, by four P. M. He lives all alone; in this respect I do not commend his example. Where his mate is, I should like to know.

I have discovered several other woodpeckers in adjoining orchards, each of which has a like home, and leads a like solitary life. One of them has excavated a dry limb within easy reach of my hand, doing the work also in September. But the choice of tree was not a good one; the limb was too much decayed, and the workman had made the cavity too large; a chip had come out, making a hole in the outer wall. Then he went a few inches down the limb and began again, and excavated a large, commodious chamber, but had again come too near the surface; scarcely more than the bark protected him in one place, and the limb was very much weakened. Then he made another attempt still farther down the limb, and drilled in an inch or two, but

seemed to change his mind; the work stopped, and I concluded the bird had wisely abandoned the tree. Passing there one cold, rainy November day, I thrust in my two fingers and was surprised to feel something soft and warm; as I drew away my hand the bird came out, apparently no more surprised than I was. It had decided, then, to make its home in the old limb; a decision it had occasion to regret, for not long after, on a stormy night, the branch gave way and fell to the ground: —

"When the bough breaks the cradle will fall,  
And down will come baby, cradle and all."

Such a cavity makes a snug, warm home, and when the entrance is on the under side of the limb, as is usual, the wind and snow cannot reach the occupant. Late in December, while crossing a high, wooded mountain, lured by the music of fox-hounds, I discovered fresh yellow chips strewing the new-fallen snow, and at once thought of my woodpeckers. On looking around I saw where one had been at work excavating a lodge in a small yellow birch. The orifice was about fifteen feet from the ground, and appeared as round as if struck with a compass. It was on the east side of the tree, so as to avoid the prevailing west and northwest winds. As it was nearly two inches in diameter, it could not have been the work of the downy, but must have been that of the hairy, or else the yellow-bellied woodpecker. His home had probably been wrecked by some violent wind, and he

was thus providing himself another. In digging out these retreats the woodpeckers prefer a dry, brittle trunk, not too soft. They go in horizontally to the centre and then turn downward, enlarging the tunnel as they go, till when finished it is the shape of a long, deep pear.

Another trait our woodpeckers have that endears them to me, and that has never been pointedly noticed by our ornithologists, is their habit of drumming in the spring. They are songless birds, and yet all are musicians; they make the dry limbs eloquent of the coming change. Did you think that loud, sonorous hammering which proceeded from the orchard or from the near woods on that still March or April morning was only some bird getting its breakfast? It is downy, but he is not rapping at the door of a grub; he is rapping at the door of spring, and the dry limb thrills beneath the ardor of his blows. Or, later in the season, in the dense forest or by some remote mountain lake, does that measured rhythmic beat that breaks upon the silence, first three strokes following each other rapidly, succeeded by two louder ones with longer intervals between them, and that has an effect upon the alert ear as if the solitude itself had at last found a voice, – does that suggest anything less than a deliberate musical performance? In fact, our woodpeckers are just as characteristically drummers as is the ruffed grouse, and they have their particular limbs and stubs to which they resort for that purpose. Their need of expression is apparently just as great as that of the song-birds, and it is not surprising that they should

have found out that there is music in a dry, seasoned limb which can be evoked beneath their beaks.

A few seasons ago, a downy woodpecker, probably the individual one who is now my winter neighbor, began to drum early in March in a partly decayed apple-tree that stands in the edge of a narrow strip of woodland near me. When the morning was still and mild I would often hear him through my window before I was up, or by half-past six o'clock, and he would keep it up pretty briskly till nine or ten o'clock, in this respect resembling the grouse, which do most of their drumming in the forenoon. His drum was the stub of a dry limb about the size of one's wrist. The heart was decayed and gone, but the outer shell was hard and resonant. The bird would keep his position there for an hour at a time. Between his drummings he would preen his plumage and listen as if for the response of the female, or for the drum of some rival. How swift his head would go when he was delivering his blows upon the limb! His beak wore the surface perceptibly. When he wished to change the key, which was quite often, he would shift his position an inch or two to a knot which gave out a higher, shriller note. When I climbed up to examine his drum he was much disturbed. I did not know he was in the vicinity, but it seems he saw me from a near tree, and came in haste to the neighboring branches, and with spread plumage and a sharp note demanded plainly enough what my business was with his drum. I was invading his privacy, desecrating his shrine, and the bird was much put out. After some weeks the female

appeared; he had literally drummed up a mate; his urgent and oft-repeated advertisement was answered. Still the drumming did not cease, but was quite as fervent as before. If a mate could be won by drumming, she could be kept and entertained by more drumming; courtship should not end with marriage. If the bird felt musical before, of course he felt much more so now. Besides that, the gentle deities needed propitiating in behalf of the nest and young as well as in behalf of the mate. After a time a second female came, when there was war between the two. I did not see them come to blows, but I saw one female pursuing the other about the place, and giving her no rest for several days. She was evidently trying to run her out of the neighborhood. Now and then, she, too, would drum briefly, as if sending a triumphant message to her mate.

The woodpeckers do not each have a particular dry limb to which they resort at all times to drum, like the one I have described. The woods are full of suitable branches, and they drum more or less here and there as they are in quest of food; yet I am convinced each one has its favorite spot, like the grouse, to which it resorts especially in the morning. The sugar-maker in the maple-woods may notice that this sound proceeds from the same tree or trees about his camp with great regularity. A woodpecker in my vicinity has drummed for two seasons on a telegraph pole, and he makes the wires and glass insulators ring. Another drums on a thin board on the end of a long grape-arbor, and on still mornings can be heard a long distance.

A friend of mine in a Southern city tells me of a red-headed woodpecker that drums upon a lightning-rod on his neighbor's house. Nearly every clear, still morning at certain seasons, he says, this musical rapping may be heard. "He alternates his tapping with his stridulous call, and the effect on a cool, autumn-like morning is very pleasing."

The high-hole appears to drum more promiscuously than does downy. He utters his long, loud spring call, *whick – whick – whick – whick*, and then begins to rap with his beak upon his perch before the last note has reached your ear. I have seen him drum sitting upon the ridge of the barn. The log-cock, or pileated woodpecker, the largest and wildest of our Northern species, I have never heard drum. His blows should wake the echoes.

When the woodpecker is searching for food, or laying siege to some hidden grub, the sound of his hammer is dead or muffled, and is heard but a few yards. It is only upon dry, seasoned timber, freed of its bark, that he beats his reveille to spring and woos his mate.

Wilson was evidently familiar with this vernal drumming of the woodpeckers, but quite misinterprets it. Speaking of the red-bellied species, he says: "It rattles like the rest of the tribe on the dead limbs, and with such violence as to be heard in still weather more than half a mile off; and listens to hear the insect it has alarmed." He listens rather to hear the drum of his rival, or the brief and coy response of the female; for there are no insects in these dry limbs.

On one occasion I saw downy at his drum when a female flew quickly through the tree and alighted a few yards beyond him. He paused instantly, and kept his place apparently without moving a muscle. The female, I took it, had answered his advertisement. She flitted about from limb to limb (the female may be known by the absence of the crimson spot on the back of the head), apparently full of business of her own, and now and then would drum in a shy, tentative manner. The male watched her a few moments, and, convinced perhaps that she meant business, struck up his liveliest tune, then listened for her response. As it came back timidly but promptly, he left his perch and sought a nearer acquaintance with the prudent female. Whether or not a match grew out of this little flirtation I cannot say.

Our smaller woodpeckers are sometimes accused of injuring the apple and other fruit trees, but the depredator is probably the larger and rarer yellow-bellied species. One autumn I caught one of these fellows in the act of sinking long rows of his little wells in the limb of an apple-tree. There were series of rings of them, one above another, quite around the stem, some of them the third of an inch across. They are evidently made to get at the tender, juicy bark, or cambium layer, next to the hard wood of the tree. The health and vitality of the branch are so seriously impaired by them that it often dies.

In the following winter the same bird (probably) tapped a maple-tree in front of my window in fifty-six places; and when the day was sunny, and the sap oozed out, he spent most of

his time there. He knew the good sap-days, and was on hand promptly for his tipples; cold and cloudy days he did not appear. He knew which side of the tree to tap, too, and avoided the sunless northern exposure. When one series of well-holes failed to supply him, he would sink another, drilling through the bark with great ease and quickness. Then, when the day was warm, and the sap ran freely, he would have a regular sugar-maple debauch, sitting there by his wells hour after hour, and as fast as they became filled sipping out the sap. This he did in a gentle, caressing manner that was very suggestive. He made a row of wells near the foot of the tree, and other rows higher up, and he would hop up and down the trunk as these became filled. He would hop down the tree backward with the utmost ease, throwing his tail outward and his head inward at each hop. When the wells would freeze up or his thirst become slaked, he would ruffle his feathers, draw himself together, and sit and doze in the sun on the side of the tree. He passed the night in a hole in an apple-tree not far off. He was evidently a young bird, not yet having the plumage of the mature male or female, and yet he knew which tree to tap and where to tap it. I saw where he had bored several maples in the vicinity, but no oaks or chestnuts. I nailed up a fat bone near his sap-works: the downy woodpecker came there several times a day to dine; the nuthatch came, and even the snowbird took a taste occasionally; but this sapsucker never touched it – the sweet of the tree sufficed for him. This woodpecker does not breed or abound in my vicinity; only stray

specimens are now and then to be met with in the colder months. As spring approached, the one I refer to took his departure.

I must bring my account of my neighbor in the tree down to the latest date; so after the lapse of a year I add the following notes. The last day of February was bright and spring-like. I heard the first sparrow sing that morning and the first screaming of the circling hawks, and about seven o'clock the first drumming of my little friend. His first notes were uncertain and at long intervals, but by and by he warmed up and beat a lively tattoo. As the season advanced he ceased to lodge in his old quarters. I would rap and find nobody at home. Was he out on a lark, I said, the spring fever working in his blood? After a time his drumming grew less frequent, and finally, in the middle of April, ceased entirely. Had some accident befallen him, or had he wandered away to fresh fields, following some siren of his species? Probably the latter. Another bird that I had under observation also left his winter-quarters in the spring. This, then, appears to be the usual custom. The wrens and the nuthatches and chickadees succeed to these abandoned cavities, and often have amusing disputes over them. The nuthatches frequently pass the night in them, and the wrens and chickadees nest in them. I have further observed that in excavating a cavity for a nest the downy woodpecker makes the entrance smaller than when he is excavating his winter-quarters. This is doubtless for the greater safety of the young birds.

The next fall the downy excavated another limb in the old apple-tree, but had not got his retreat quite finished when the

large hairy woodpecker appeared upon the scene. I heard his loud *click, click*, early one frosty November morning. There was something impatient and angry in the tone that arrested my attention. I saw the bird fly to the tree where downy had been at work, and fall with great violence upon the entrance to his cavity. The bark and the chips flew beneath his vigorous blows, and, before I fairly woke up to what he was doing, he had completely demolished the neat, round doorway of downy. He had made a large, ragged opening, large enough for himself to enter. I drove him away and my favorite came back, but only to survey the ruins of his castle for a moment and then go away. He lingered about for a day or two and then disappeared. The big hairy usurper passed a night in the cavity; but on being hustled out of it the next night by me, he also left, but not till he had demolished the entrance to a cavity in a neighboring tree where downy and his mate had reared their brood that summer, and where I had hoped the female would pass the winter.

### III

## A SPRING RELISH

It is a little remarkable how regularly severe and mild winters alternate in our climate for a series of years, – a feminine and a masculine one, as it were, almost invariably following each other. Every other season now for ten years the ice-gatherers on the river have been disappointed of a full harvest, and every other season the ice has formed from fifteen to twenty inches thick. From 1873 to 1884 there was no marked exception to this rule. But in the last-named year, when, according to the succession, a mild winter was due, the breed seemed to have got crossed, and a sort of mongrel winter was the result; neither mild nor severe, but very stormy, capricious, and disagreeable, with ice a foot thick on the river. The winter which followed, that of 1884-85, though slow and hesitating at first, fully proved itself as belonging to the masculine order. The present winter of 1885-86 shows a marked return to the type of two years ago – less hail and snow, but by no means the mild season that was due. By and by, probably, the meteorological influences will get back into the old ruts again, and we shall have once more the regular alternation of mild and severe winters. During very open winters, like that of 1879-80, nature in my latitude, eighty miles north of New York, hardly shuts up house at all. That season I heard a little piping frog on the 7th of December, and on the 18th of January, in a spring run,

I saw the common bullfrog out of his hibernaculum, evidently thinking it was spring. A copperhead snake was killed here about the same date; caterpillars did not seem to retire, as they usually do, but came forth every warm day. The note of the bluebird was heard nearly every week all winter, and occasionally that of the robin. Such open winters make one fear that his appetite for spring will be blunted when spring really does come; but he usually finds that the April days have the old relish. April is that part of the season that never cloy upon the palate. It does not surfeit one with good things, but provokes and stimulates the curiosity. One is on the alert; there are hints and suggestions on every hand. Something has just passed, or stirred, or called, or breathed, in the open air or in the ground about, that we would fain know more of. May is sweet, but April is pungent. There is frost enough in it to make it sharp, and heat enough in it to make it quick.

In my walks in April, I am on the lookout for watercresses. It is a plant that has the pungent April flavor. In many parts of the country the watercress seems to have become completely naturalized, and is essentially a wild plant. I found it one day in a springy place, on the top of a high, wooded mountain, far from human habitation. We gathered it and ate it with our sandwiches. Where the walker cannot find this salad, a good substitute may be had in our native spring cress, which is also in perfection in April. Crossing a wooded hill in the regions of the Catskills on the 15th of the month, I found a purple variety of the plant, on

the margin of a spring that issued from beneath a ledge of rocks, just ready to bloom. I gathered the little white tubers, that are clustered like miniature potatoes at the root, and ate them, and they were a surprise and a challenge to the tongue; on the table they would well fill the place of mustard, and horseradish, and other appetizers. When I was a schoolboy, we used to gather, in a piece of woods on our way to school, the roots of a closely allied species to eat with our lunch. But we generally ate it up before lunch-time. Our name for this plant was "Crinkle-root." The botanists call it the toothwort (*Dentaria*), also pepper-root.

From what fact or event shall one really date the beginning of spring? The little piping frogs usually furnish a good starting-point. One spring I heard the first note on the 6th of April; the next on the 27th of February; but in reality the latter season was only two weeks earlier than the former. When the bees carry in their first pollen, one would think spring had come; yet this fact does not always correspond with the real stage of the season. Before there is any bloom anywhere, bees will bring pollen to the hive. Where do they get it?

I have seen them gathering it on the fresh sawdust in the woodyard, especially on that of hickory or maple. They wallow amid the dust, working it over and over, and searching it like diamond-hunters, and after a time their baskets are filled with the precious flour, which is probably only a certain part of the wood, doubtless the soft, nutritious inner bark.

In fact, all signs and phases of life in the early season are

very capricious, and are earlier or later just as some local or exceptional circumstance favors or hinders. It is only such birds as arrive after about the 20th of April that are at all "punctual" according to the almanac. I have never known the arrival of the barn swallow to vary much from that date in this latitude, no matter how early or late the season might be. Another punctual bird is the yellow redpoll warbler, the first of his class that appears. Year after year, between the 20th and the 25th, I am sure to see this little bird about my place for a day or two only, now on the ground, now on the fences, now on the small trees and shrubs, and closely examining the buds or just-opening leaves of the apple-trees. He is a small olive-colored bird, with a dark-red or maroon-colored patch on the top of his head. His ordinary note is a smart "chirp." His movements are very characteristic, especially that vertical, oscillating movement of the hind part of his body, like that of the wagtails. There are many birds that do not come here till May, be the season never so early. The spring of 1878 was very forward, and on the 27th of April I made this entry in my notebook: "In nature it is the middle of May, and, judging from vegetation alone, one would expect to find many of the later birds, as the oriole, the wood thrush, the kingbird, the catbird, the tanager, the indigo-bird, the vireos, and many of the warblers, but they have not arrived. The May birds, it seems, will not come in April, no matter how the season favors."

Some birds passing north in the spring are provokingly silent. Every April I see the hermit thrush hopping about the woods,

and in case of a sudden snow-storm seeking shelter about the outbuildings; but I never hear even a fragment of his wild, silvery strain. The white-crowned sparrow also passes in silence. I see the bird for a few days about the same date each year, but he will not reveal to me his song. On the other hand, his congener, the white-throated sparrow, is decidedly musical in passing, both spring and fall. His sweet, wavering whistle is at times quite as full and perfect as when heard in June or July in the Canadian woods. The latter bird is much more numerous than the white-crowned, and its stay with us more protracted, which may in a measure account for the greater frequency of its song. The fox sparrow, who passes earlier (sometimes in March), is also chary of the music with which he is so richly endowed. It is not every season that I hear him, though my ear is on the alert for his strong, finely-modulated whistle.

Nearly all the warblers sing in passing. I hear them in the orchards, in the groves, in the woods, as they pause to feed in their northward journey, their brief, lisping, shuffling, insect-like notes requiring to be searched for by the ear, as their forms by the eye. But the ear is not tasked to identify the songs of the kinglets, as they tarry briefly with us in spring. In fact, there is generally a week in April or early May, —

"On such a time as goes before the leaf,  
When all the woods stand in a mist of green  
And nothing perfect," —

during which the piping, voluble, rapid, intricate, and delicious warble of the ruby-crowned kinglet is the most noticeable strain to be heard, especially among the evergreens.

I notice that during the mating season of the birds the rivalries and jealousies are not all confined to the males. Indeed, the most spiteful and furious battles, as among the domestic fowls, are frequently between females. I have seen two hen robins scratch and pull feathers in a manner that contrasted strongly with the courtly and dignified sparring usual between the males. One March a pair of bluebirds decided to set up housekeeping in the trunk of an old apple-tree near my house. Not long after, an unwedded female appeared, and probably tried to supplant the lawful wife. I did not see what arts she used, but I saw her being very roughly handled by the jealous bride. The battle continued nearly all day about the orchard and grounds, and was a battle at very close quarters. The two birds would clinch in the air or on a tree, and fall to the ground with beaks and claws locked. The male followed them about, and warbled and called, but whether deprecatingly or encouragingly, I could not tell. Occasionally he would take a hand, but whether to separate them or whether to fan the flames, that I could not tell. So far as I could see, he was highly amused, and culpably indifferent to the issue of the battle.

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